The Christian News-Letter

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Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

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DEAR MEMBER,

The Christian News-Letter from its inception has stood for the view that the war is being waged on two fronts. That means, if it is taken seriously, that crises arise from time to time on the spiritual as well as on the military front. The critical points in the spiritual battle ought to be of as much concern to us as the Battle of the Atlantic or the Battle of the Mediterranean.

THE BATTLE OF THE BOOKS

One of these critical points is the subject of an article by Mr. Geoffrey Faber in *The Times Literary Supplement* of April 19th entitled " The New Threat to Books: Imperilling a Principle of High Policy." A year ago books had to face the threat of taxation. This was successfully resisted. The new danger is that restrictions in paper and boards for binding and the withdrawal of essential workers in the book-producing industries may destroy the book trade, both home and export. The vital matter is that the question should not be treated departmentally and decided on purely economic and military grounds, but should be seen to involve a principle of high policy. One of the most deadly effects of war, as was pointed out in the first issue of the News-Letter, is the pressure towards a black-out of mind. Resistance to this must be encouraged, not suppressed. There has, in fact, been a striking increase in recent months of the demand for books of all kinds both in the fighting services and among civilians. If the possibility of meeting this demand is cut off, a perilous step will have been taken in the direction of mental stagnation and death.

The international aspects are no less important. Books are the best ambassadors of a nation. We are heirs in this country of a history and tradition that have a value for mankind; it is that spiritual heritage that we are defending at an immeasurable price. If Great Britain is no longer able to produce books for export, the trade in books in other parts of the British Commonwealth, as well as in world markets, will pass into other hands. The British contribution to the cultural life of the world will be seriously diminished and our spiritual capacity to serve mankind gravely impaired.

Mr. Faber is not wrong in regarding the issue as fundamentally a religious one. It is a question of what we really believe to be the highest values. When we are told that the war can be won without the sale of a single further book, we have to ask ourselves what it is that we are really fighting for. Are we defending civilisation or only fighting for our own lives? If the war is a war for the freedom of the human mind, let us not betray the cause from within. President Roosevelt has told us that just as men do not live by bread alone, they do not fight by armaments alone; the mighty action that we are calling for cannot be based on a disregard of the things which make it worth while to fight.

THE BATTLE AGAINST BARBARISM

Perhaps the most critical phase in the fight to preserve human values is at the moment the use of the air arm.

In judging new forms of warfare we need to preserve a sense of proportion. The thought of children being killed by bombs in Germany is, or ought to be, hateful. But it is not certain that it is worse for a child to be killed by a bomb than to have its father killed and to endure all the material, moral and spiritual consequences of that loss. The social consequences of this war, in which the civilian population is involved, may be less serious, if it does not drag on too long, than those of the last war when the flower of the manhood of all the nations was drained away. To surrender to those who hold the Nazi creed the power to shape the purposes and institutions of society, and by the use of modern techniques to corrupt the souls of men and poison the minds of youth, would rivet on mankind a vast and sinister evil that might well outweigh the evils of war, even as it has to be waged to-day. The Germans are seeking to achieve their purpose by destroying our war production. If the only means of defeating that purpose is by shattering the industries of Germany, the price will have to be paid.

But the price may be the end of civilisation. We must, therefore, be quite clear what we are doing and why. When the Prime Minister on a visit to Manchester said " It is a tragedy, but they'll get it back threefold," what did he intend? If he meant that we shall hit industrial targets in Germany three times as hard as the Germans hit ours, that is what war has always meant and always will mean. But the vital question is whom and what we are going to hit—the centres of industry, because it is necessary in order to defeat the enemy, or the common people of Germany for the sake of revenge? If we have to attack Kiel, widespread devastation may be the inevitable result of a strictly military purpose. But we are told in regard to a raid on Berlin that the damage was extensive in three residential districts, and in a statement issued by the Air Ministry the destruction of houses and the deaths of civilians are included as evidence of heartening progress. What did the Air Minister mean when he said recently, " We in the cities and towns of this country have learnt the horror of war as the Germans wage it, but . . . as our air strength grows, we will repay them "? The Government should be pressed on the point whether the infliction of civilian casualties is incidental to attacks on military and industrial targets or is deliberate policy.

I have no means of knowing to what extent the clamour in sections of the press for retaliation reflects popular sentiment. According to a Gallup survey 53 per cent. of the population are in favour of reprisal bombing and 38 per cent. against it. The striking thing is that sentiment in favour of reprisals was markedly less in bombed than in unbombed areas. The reason given by those who disapproved were such as " It's not English. We're not Nazis. Let us keep our hands clean." Such evidence as comes my way suggests that in bombed areas in particular there is little desire for revenge. Remarks are reported like, " What good does it do me to know that a bloke in Germany has lost his home too? " The question is one in which the right lead from the Government would steady and educate public opinion.

The whole weight of the influence of the Churches should be thrown against any destruction that is not necessary for the successful prosecution of the war. The Christian tradition demands this. It is also elementary common sense in waging war not to throw away the objects for which it is waged. The Prime Minister in his recent broadcast said that we could not desert the Greeks, because " there are rules against that kind of thing, and to break those rules would be fatal to the honour of the British Empire, without which we could neither hope nor deserve to win this hard war." His words find an echo everywhere. But *mercy* as well as honour belongs to the Christian tradition of this country. It, too, has its rules which must not be broken. Do we not want to be able to say, when we look back on the war, that we were *not* dragged down to the level of barbarism, that we did *not* bomb Rome, that we did *not* deliberately bomb residential quarters? We have been forced, up to the present, to let the enemy hold the initiative in the military sphere; there is no reason at all why we should leave the initiative to him in the region of ideas. That is precisely what we do when we allow ourselves to be swayed by the argument

" Because the Nazis do these things, we will do them also." Have we no tradition, no standards, no policy that is distinctively ours? We have a tradition of our own; why should we discard it at the bidding of our enemies?

But behind our national tradition stands the Christian tradition which is based on the law of God. It may not be easy to decide what constitutes military necessity under the conditions of modern warfare, but this difficulty does not do away with the principle that to kill people for any reason other than of achieving a military object is murder. The commandment " Thou shalt do no murder " is not abrogated during war. The Christian tradition has recognised that those engaged in a just war may kill, in so far as this is an inevitable consequence of fighting, but it has insisted, and must always insist, that in war as well as in peace the use of violence must be restricted to the necessary minimum, and that wanton killing is a violation of the law of God.

ACTION IN A VILLAGE COMMUNITY

The following letter from one of our members who is a business man will be of interest to many:

" I am a Londoner born, but have lived and worked in the country during the last fifteen years, where I have endeavoured to take an intelligent interest in the youth of our villages. For seven years I have guided an organisation of lads in this village of the ages of 16—22 or 3, nominated at their request ' The League of Goodwill.' We started in this village of 800 inhabitants with half-a-dozen young chaps and decided to meet once a week just to talk things over. We soon found there was a lot to *do* in our village, the sort of things we could do in our spare time, such as cleaning up the War Memorial, taking the blind man out for walks, digging and planting old-age pensioners' gardens, etc. From this minute beginning the Club, as it soon became, grew in numbers, one by one. We met every Friday evening in the disused back-room of a cottage. Folk, who were doing interesting jobs, or who had had interesting experiences, came and yarned to us. We always had family prayers during the evening, and some were the most movingly simple acts of worship I have ever experienced. And all the while the members were organising themselves into little bands, and doing decent jobs in the locality in a quiet way.

" One by one we grew until there was no more room even to sit on the floor comfortably, when one bold soul suggested a proper club room, which was enthusiastically received. Knowing the tendency to " rush their fences," I said I must receive £10 from them as a mark of their willingness and keenness to help. I would get busy when the £10 was produced, not from money begged but from money earned and saved. Within a month the money was awaiting me one Friday evening. We got up a village fête. Friends were kind to us and gave generously. But not one penny piece did we beg. Eventually we bought our materials and on summer evenings and Saturday afternoons, built our own Club entirely. We opened a year after starting activities without a penny short, and a building which is insured for £250. Immediately we extended our membership and some teething troubles manifested themselves. Perhaps we have never quite recaptured the extraordinary friendship of our back-room days.

" At the outbreak of war the Club was requisitioned as a First Aid Post and the Club ceased to function. Of course a large percentage of our members are in the Services. I do not wish to paint too rosy a picture. There have been times of the deepest disappointment and frustration. I have always endeavoured not to interfere. The chaps have made their own rules and run their own activities. Many a time I have seen what I considered wrong decisions arrived at. Hoping that personal experience would learn 'em, I hoped above all that Christ would become to them a reality, because they were doing Christ-like things. With the exception of one or two, none of these lads ever went to Church or Chapel regularly. They would go in a body on rare occasions. I hoped one day they would bring new life into the organised religious societies in our neighbourhood, but I see no signs of it. Many a time they asked for a service on Sunday in their own Club.

But I could never see it was the right way. One day I noticed one of our members was looking pale and tired, and so inquired the reason. He then told me that he and another member of about his own age of 20, had been sitting up alternate nights for two months with an old widower who was dying. They didn't like the idea of him dying with no one near him. Nobody from our Church or Chapel seemed to have been concerned, and these chaps didn't think they had done anything much and neither of them has much use for organised religion. Here is the stuff we've got to work on, and I maintain that it is simply magnificent material. Only in the countryside as a whole it is going to waste for want of leadership. Perhaps by living so long in the country with so few breaks, one gets things out of focus. Nevertheless I fear the day when our young men and women will return to their villages and find no channels through which their energies and widened knowledge can flow."

CONDITIONS IN HOLLAND

Evidence from several sources shows that things are becoming worse for the Dutch people. Many thousands, including some of the leading citizens, are in prisons and some in concentration camps. It will be recalled that an order to Dutch metal workers to emigrate to Germany led to a strike and public demonstrations in Amsterdam, and that the city had in consequence to pay a fine of 15 million guilders. In these trials new bonds have been forged between the Church and the people. When the Christian message is fearlessly spoken it finds a response not only among Church people but in wider circles in the nation. The real longings of the people are forbidden public utterance, but they find guarded expression in their prayers as, for example, in the petition widely used in services, " for the Queen whom Thou hast set over us and for the authorities of occupation that Thou hast permitted over us."

NEXT WEEK'S NEWS-LETTER

The News-Letter will have as a supplement next week a striking contribution by Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr on " The Providence of God and the Defence of Civilisations." Two copies of the issue will be sent to each member. We cannot often afford to print 25,000 copies nowadays and we therefore ask you to justify us by seeing that the second copy reaches a friend who might become a subscriber. We need to increase our membership and Dr. Niebuhr's article will appeal to many potential members.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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